

# *Date Marking Guide for Grocery Store Delis*

This guide is intended to give practical information on how grocery store operators and deli managers can comply with Food Code date marking requirements that apply to many ready-to-eat, potentially hazardous foods. Some of the challenges operators may face include:

- Determining which foods are required to be date marked,
- Developing a date marking system for employees to follow, and
- Ordering volumes and sizes of product that can be sold within 7 days of opening.

## **Why is Date Marking Important?**

Date marking is a way to track proper product rotation of refrigerated foods. Refrigeration prevents food from becoming a hazard by slowing the growth of most, but not all, bacteria. Pathogens like *Listeria monocytogenes* have been found in deli environments and can grow at cold temperatures on deli items. Date marking is one of the practices used to reduce the risk of foodborne illness by making sure food is rotated or discarded before *Listeria* can multiply to greater numbers.

## **Ways to Mark the Date**

A grocery operator can choose any marking method that suits their needs. Options include using an actual date, a color code, or any other system that is effective. It is

even possible to use a dry-erase board to track items in the deli case and their dates. It is important to know that whatever system you use, it must be understandable, effective, and consistently used by the employees. It must be clear to an inspector during the inspection how your system works so you should consider writing a store policy for employees to follow.



## Methods of Marking

Here are some examples of ways to mark on working containers, display tags, display bowls, or plastic over-wraps:

- Day dots
- Dry erase markers
- Scale labels
- Dissolvable stickers

There may be other ways to track dates without marking on the actual containers. You may come up with your own method as long as it can be verified that the employees and the inspector understand it.



## Deli Salads

Containers of salads like potato, pasta, and seafood salad must be marked when opened or made on the premises.

Many manufacturers offer smaller sized containers of salads (e.g., three pounds) that can be used all at once in a display bowl. This eliminates a working container. However the bowls of salad in the display case must be marked if held more than 24 hours.

If fresh salad is continually added to the display ( "topping off" the display) over the course of a few days, be

sure to use the date of the original load. You must break the cycle within seven days (preferably much more frequently) by removing the salad, cleaning & sanitizing the bowl, and starting with fresh salad.



## Deli Meats

Date marking applies to entire loaves of deli meats once the original package is opened in the deli. Refrigerated deli meats should be purchased in sizes that can be sliced and sold within seven days of opening. If this is not possible, a way to use up a slow moving loaf of deli meat is by making it into other products such as sandwiches. But do this right away instead of waiting until day seven.

## What Date Applies if I Package Deli Items for Sale?

While "date marking" is a rotation date for the employee to know, a "last-date-of-sale" is a date the consumer sees on a package. Whenever a deli item is packaged for sale out of a self-service case, the package must be marked with the last-date-of-sale (or sell-by date). The sell-by date should take into consideration a reasonable period of time the product will be used in the

consumer's home and still be wholesome and safe. Date marking helps you know how long the product has been opened in your store before packaging it and thus helps you determine a meaningful sell-by date. For example, if a tub of potato salad was opened in the deli four days ago and you want to prepackage some half pound containers for sale in the self-service case, you should take into consideration those four extra days and use a shorter sell-by date than if the packaging occurred on day one. Regardless of the date you choose, the product cannot be sold after day seven.

### **Our deli goes through salami so fast that the loaf will be gone in less than 4 days. Do I still need to date mark it?**

Yes, if the food is not going to be served, sold, or discarded within 24 hours, it must be date marked.

### **What if I freeze the food?**

Freezing food stops the date marking clock but does not reset it. So if a food is stored at 41° F for two days and then frozen at 0° F, it can still be stored at 41° F for five more days when it begins to thaw. The freezing date and the thawing date need to be put on the container along with the prep date, or an indication of how many of the original 7 days have been used. If food is not dated with these dates, it must be used or discarded within 24 hours.

### **What if I combine food that was opened on different dates?**

When different containers of foods are combined, the date of the **oldest** ingredient becomes the reference date. For example, if today is Wednesday, and you are mixing salad that was marked on Monday with salad that was marked on Tuesday, the combined salad marking would be based on a starting date of Monday.

## **Items Requiring Date Marking**

Here are some examples of refrigerated, ready-to-eat, "potentially hazardous" foods requiring date marking:

- Deli meats and deli salads
- Soft cheeses like Brie, Cotijo, Cottage, Ricotta and Teleme.
- Blue cheese and ranch dressings (unless the manufacturer provides documentation otherwise).

## **Items Not Requiring Date Marking**

Some deli items may not require date marking. "Non-potentially hazardous" foods, like acidified vegetable items (pickles) or shelf stable meat, do not need to be date marked. Ask your supplier for a letter from the manufacturer for those items that are "non-potentially hazardous" (see the Food Code definition).

Here are other examples:

- Commercial acidified dressing like mayonnaise and thousand island.
- Hard cheeses like Asiago old, Cheddar, Gruyere, Parmesan, Romano and Sapsago.
- Semi-soft cheeses like Asiago fresh, Soft, Blue, Brick, Colby,

Edam, Gouda, Monterey,  
Pasteurized processed cheese,  
Provolone and Swiss.

## Questions?

Check with your Inspector or contact  
the MDA regional office nearest to  
you.

***For more information about date  
marking requirements, ask for the  
MDA Food Code Fact Sheet on Date  
Marking or the 1999 Food Code.***



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